
Good News from the Sanctuary in Heaven: God's Continuing Initiative

by Fritz Guy

If a religious idea is going to be persuasive—to people within the community of faith as well as to others outside it—that idea needs to carry contemporary meaning. Not only does it need to be intellectually credible (by having sufficient reason for being regarded as true), but it must also be experientially significant (by making a difference for one's concrete existence here and now). In other words, in order to be taken seriously enough to be actually *believed*, an idea needs to *matter*. Without this kind of significance, a religious idea is simply uninteresting. At best it is a kind of holy puzzle or word game. Then it is not really believed, not because it is thought to be “untrue” or “wrong,” but because people do not care enough about it to incorporate it into the thinking that guides their daily lives. The idea is just ignored.

In this regard the doctrine of Christ, the high priest, in the sanctuary in heaven (which is usually called the doctrine of the sanctuary¹) is especially a problem, because its major elements seem utterly unrelated to modern existence. Firstly, even if our ex-

perience of going to church enables us to grasp the meaning of a “holy place,” that is nothing like the meaning of the “Holy of Holies” or “most holy place” of the biblical world. Secondly, there is nothing in Christianity that makes any direct contact with a “high priesthood.” (The Catholic tradition, to be sure, has an ordained priesthood and a clerical hierarchy, but nothing that corresponds to the ancient Hebrew role of the sanctuary's high priest.) And, thirdly, the Adventist doctrine of the sanctuary is about a “high priest” who functions in a “most holy place” that is in *heaven*, which is a reality that is radically different from anything that we have personally encountered. So the experiential significance of this particular doctrine is not immediately obvious.

Yet the doctrine of the sanctuary belongs to the biblical revelation (especially the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Daniel, and the New Testament books of Hebrews and Revelation), and it is a prominent element in the heritage and definition of Adventism. Part of the theological task of the church, therefore, is to uncover and communicate the significance of this doctrine for contemporary life. Thanks to some questions raised a few years ago, Adventist theology has become more interested in this

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subject, and this essay is intended to be a small further contribution to the discussion.¹

My thesis is that, among other things, the doctrine of the sanctuary affirms the good news of God's continuing initiative for the salvation of humanity; and I would like to suggest what this involves.

Reconciling

Christ the High priest is Christ, the incarnate Servant, the crucified Messiah, the risen and ascended Lord. His heavenly, high-priestly ministry is an extension and implementation of his earthly, sacrificial ministry. So Hebrews 7:25 (RSV), "He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them," is an

elaboration of John 3:16 (RSV), "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The sacrificial ministry of Christ on earth was atonement and reconciliation as a unique historical event; the high-priestly ministry of Christ in the sanctuary in heaven is atonement and reconciliation as an ongoing process.

The sanctuaries in the life of the Hebrews were a revelation of the activity of God in addressing the fact of human sin—that is, the continuing initiative of God in atonement and reconciliation. Revelation is not to be identified with atonement, for there is more to atonement than revelation. But neither is revelation merely a report of atonement. Rather, revelation is an essential dimension of the whole process of atonement, just as expression is an essential dimension of love.² Atonement no more

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In the change that is the consequence of history, a particular idea sometimes loses its apparent relevance to contemporary existence. Such an idea then tends to disappear from the thought as well as the discourse of the community: because it is no longer experientially meaningful, there is little reason to think or talk about it. Thus there develops a disparity between what the community once believed and what it now actually and actively (as opposed to merely nominally and superficially) believes. To this situation there may be three kinds of response.

On the one hand, some who feel uncomfortable about the disparity may suggest that the now-ignored idea ought *not* to be ignored because it is in fact essential to the identity of the community. That is, the idea in question is regarded as part of the definition of the community, so that to *be* this community *means* actively to believe this idea. If the community no longer believes as it once did, it has thereby ceased to be what it was (and what it still claims to be) and has become something else; and to that extent it has betrayed its heritage and lost its original, authentic identity. What the "defenders of the faith" are in fact doing with this line of reasoning (although they do not think of it in this

way) is making the idea experientially relevant again. In so doing, however, they are giving it a new (and different) relevance; for in place of its original experiential significance (whatever it was), it now has the significance of being a means of continuity with the past.

On the other hand, some others who also feel uncomfortable about the disparity between the past and the present belief of the community may suggest that the idea is not merely irrelevant to contemporary experience but indeed conceptually *untrue* (because it lacks adequate support of one kind or another). Therefore it should not have been believed in the first place, and the community was mistaken (if not deluded) to have ever believed it. This second kind of response is of course likely to elicit strong opposition from those who have made (or are inclined to make) the first kind of response. Indeed, this latter kind seems all the more threatening if the disparity between past and present belief is widely felt within the community of faith, and if there is a widespread (though generally vague) feelings of theological insecurity. Thus, ironically, the magnitude and prominence of the second kind of response (by the critics of the tradition) may well contribute to the extent and intensity of the

than love can keep itself secret; it includes the communication of itself.

There is, of course, an important sense in which the salvation of humanity is an accomplished, irrevocable fact. This is the heart of the Christian gospel. But it is not the whole of the gospel. For the gospel also includes the fact that salvation is an extended process in which God continues to take the initiative. This continuing initiative is symbolized by the ministry of Christ as high priest in heaven.

When Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30), he declared that the crucified God had done what needed to be done: he had totally identified himself with humanity by voluntarily suffering the consequences of human sin. But he did not declare that he was "finished" with his divine ministry to human need, and thus with the activity of atonement and recon-

ciliation. He did not announce that henceforth he would be a retired Savior with nothing to do but wait for the ultimate outcome of his previous work.

And it is not merely divine activity that continues; it is the divine initiative. This is what makes the ministry of the High Priest in the sanctuary in heaven truly good news. For it is not merely a matter of God's interested observation and moral support, nor even just a matter of divine response to our decisions and assistance in our efforts. If that were all, we would have no assurance, and hope would be impossible (or at best irrational). The ministry of Christ as high priest means that God does not say to us, "I have now done my thing. The rest is up to you." Rather, the High Priest who "has suffered and been tempted" is "able to help those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18), and the help is offered even before we know

first kind of response (by the defenders of the faith).

Yet a third kind of response is also possible—one that like the first proposes a new experiential significance for an old idea, but like the second does not find in the need for theological continuity with the past a sufficient reason for actively believing and proclaiming an otherwise irrelevant idea. Thus there may be those who suggest that the idea in question does have important experiential significance, even though this is not exactly the same meaning it had originally. Therefore, the idea ought to be maintained for the good of the community, and its contemporary meaning should be clarified and developed. Like all hybrid responses, however, this one tends to be regarded with suspicion by those who make either of the other two kinds of response. To the defenders of the faith, this response seems to be an illegitimate revisionism, a deliberately camouflaged renunciation of the community's heritage; and to the critics of the tradition it seems to be a futile rearguard action by those who recognize that the doctrine is not in fact true but who do not have the moral courage to say so.

It may be noted here that in spite of the differences among the three responses, they all carry the same complementary temptations to self-

righteousness and paranoia: the proponents of each response tend to feel that they alone are on the side of the angels, and that they are unfairly criticized by their opponents and unappreciated by the community as a whole.

It is evident that this brief sketch of ways of responding to a disparity between past and present belief is directly applicable to the current discussion within Adventism regarding the doctrine of the sanctuary. When this doctrine was originally formulated in the middle of the 19th century, it "mattered" profoundly, for it explained the Adventist experience of 1844, including both the joy of expectation and the trauma of disappointment. But as that experience became increasingly distant in time, its importance diminished; eventually it came to be largely ignored in the actual life of the church, because it seemed to have little pastoral or evangelistic function. At that point it was perhaps inevitable that (1) some members of the community would suspect that the doctrine was not only irrelevant but also untrue, (2) this criticism of the community's theological heritage would evoke a vigorous reaction, and (3) there would be an attempt to show that the doctrine of the sanctuary has had an important contemporary significance. In any case, this essay is an example of the third kind of response.

we need it. If we need forgiveness, it is already available. If we need strength to resist evil, to confront tragedy, to understand truth, to live generously, it is immediately available, because God continues to take the initiative for our salvation. This good news is revealed (among other ways) by the fact that Christ is our high priest in heaven.

The fact that Christ is high priest thus shows that he is still Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). The self-giving of God in Christ was a singular event as far as human history is concerned, but the incarnation was not the beginning and the ascension was not the end of a temporary attitude toward human beings as far as God is concerned. God is revealed in Christ—both as suffering servant and as high priest—as eternally "with us." This is the way God is in relation to his moral universe.³ When God announces "I the Lord know not change" (Malachi 3:6) he is affirming his moral consistency, his covenant responsibility, his faithfulness to his promise.⁴ Hence the conclusion that immediately follows: "Therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." The revelation of Christ as high priest means that we need not be consumed, either, in spite of the destructiveness of our world and our own self-destructiveness, for God's initiative for our salvation continues.

Sustaining

It is significant that God's continuing initiative on our behalf originates in heaven. This fact draws our attention to a transcendent kind of reality. Heaven, as "the 'place' of God's presence,"⁵ is a reality that is not only "above" (that is, other than and superior to) the reality we know "here below"; it is also "ahead" as the qualitative goal (that is, the present actualization of the future fulfillment) of the reality we now experience.

The transcendent "location" of Christ as high priest is thus a reminder of the fact that

the "here and now" is not the ultimate created reality. The present reality is not even the ultimate *human* reality. There is something *else* that is something *better*—a reality different from the present, "above" it and "ahead of" it, yet now related to the present as its goal and fulfillment. A consciousness of Christ ministering for our benefit in the transcendent reality of heaven helps us avoid two major and opposite temptations of our present reality: remembering the superior reality of the "place" where Christ ministers keeps us from arrogance; and remembering that Christ's ministry in that reality is a ministry *for us* keeps us from despair.

The ministry of Christ in a heavenly sanctuary also reveals the transcendent and eternal reality of holiness. As transcendent and eternal, holiness is transcultural. In spite of its apparent strangeness, therefore, holiness is as relevant to the modern mind as it was to the biblical mind.

"The modern mind needs precisely what it finds so alien to its immediate inclination—a sense of transcendent and absolute holiness."

The modern mind is distinguished first of all by its scientific consciousness—its sense of the vast amount of knowledge available about the natural world and the way it works. This sense is by no means limited to professional scientists; it is shared by all informed people in our time. The modern mind is also distinguished by what might be called its anthropological consciousness—its sense of the enormous variety of human experience (individual and collective, past and present, Western and Oriental, and primal). The behavioral and social sciences have enlarged the modern mind with at least a general awareness of the way human being

functions and some of the reasons why. The combination of scientific and anthropological consciousness has led the modern mind into a kind of ambivalent humanism that is relativistic and realistic, liberated and tolerant, skeptical and uncertain.

So the modern mind needs precisely what it finds so alien to its immediate inclinations—a sense of transcendent and absolute holiness. In another time and place and culture this holiness was encountered in the Hebrew sanctuaries; for us it is symbolized by the sanctuary in heaven. Such an ultimate “locus” of holiness is essential to human beings; for only a transcendent holiness can function adequately as a source and criterion of value and goodness, and thus as a ground of meaning for humanity as a whole and for individual people.

Reassuring

At the same time that the continuing initiative of Christ as high priest symbolizes the transcendent reality of heaven and the ultimate locus of holiness, it also symbolizes the nearness of heaven and holiness to human being. For the mediatorial role of the High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary is intended, not to maintain the distance between God and humanity, but to overcome it. That is, Christ functions as high priest, not because God wants to keep us away from himself, but because he wants us to come close to himself. Indeed, if God wanted to keep us at a distance, Christ would not serve well as our high priest. For he does not merely represent God; he is God.

The ancient Hebrew sanctuaries—the tent in the wilderness, and the temples of Solomon, Zerubabel, and Herod—were first of all a revelation of the presence of God. “Let them make me a sanctuary,” Yahweh had said, “that I may dwell in their midst” (Exodus 25:8). These sanctuaries were the focal point of the divine presence, not its totality, as if the rest of the world

were off-limits to God, but the primary place where God appeared, and the place where holiness could be most readily experienced. Having encountered God’s presence vividly and dramatically here, and having thus been “sensitized” to it, one could more easily detect it elsewhere. Thus the revelation of the divine in and through the historical sanctuaries was to be the means of illuminating the whole of human experience with the light of the presence of God.

The sanctuary in heaven has the same kind of function. It, too, is a revelation of the presence of God—the nearness of transcendence and holiness in the concrete existence of human being.

Thus it is clear that as high priest, Christ is a “mediator” in a very special, revelatory sense. Just as on the cross he was not a “third party” who was being punished by God for our sins, but rather God identifying himself with humanity and taking on himself the consequences of sin,⁶ so in the sanctuary in heaven there is no “middle-man” between God and humanity, but rather God making himself accessible to us in a way that will encourage our positive response. If we speak of Christ as “our Man in heaven,”⁷ we must remember that he is that only because he is first “God with us.”

So it was God who was in Christ, “Himself the priest, Himself the victim.”⁸ The high priesthood of Christ in heaven is significantly like that of the Hebrew high priests because it too involved a sacrifice, yet it is radically different from theirs not only because Christ sacrificed himself, but also because his self-sacrifice was God’s own self-sacrifice. The death of Christ is actually a statement that God makes about himself⁹ and therefore about the ultimate nature of the reality which he has created: namely, that greatness is disclosed in humiliation, power in vulnerability, sovereignty in self-surrender.¹⁰ The High Priest in heaven, who is both sacrifice and God, reminds us that the continuing initiative in our behalf is the initiative of an omnipotence that identifies

itself with our humanness. This extraordinary mediator is no neutral “go-between”; he is God wholly and eternally “on our side.”

None of this, of course, is new. But it has profound experiential significance. It is no easier now than it ever was to be satisfied with the glib assurance that “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world.”¹¹ We know too well that all is not right with the world, with human beings, or with our own existence. We know that life is not fair. We know that as strategies for personal or professional success, integrity and generosity do not work as well as shrewdness and self-interest. We know that achievement and satisfaction are not the inevitable results of unselfish motives or diligent efforts. In this setting, it is good to know that in the transcendent reality of heaven is a sanctuary symbolizing ultimate holiness, and that its high priest is the God who is on our side.

Culminating

Whatever one may think about the temporality of God (that is, whether the divine eternity is understood as timelessness or as everlasting time),¹² it is evident that in relation to human time the ministry of Christ as high priest in heaven is not unending. It is the continuing initiative of God for the salvation of human beings, but it does not continue indefinitely. It is an ongoing process of atonement and reconciliation, but it does not go on forever. As a divine activity that is going on now, it is “above” the “present” in which we live, but it also points “ahead” to a future in which this particular activity has been completed:

Christ has entered not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf . . . And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:24, 27–29, RSV)

Thus the ministry of Christ as high priest in heaven has an unmistakable association with eschatological events. It anticipates its own consummation, its own end. And its end is related to the end, the Eschaton.

For the continuing divine initiative for the salvation of human being lasts only as long as the tragic reality of sin, and sin is not everlasting. Thus the fact that the ministry of the High Priest comes to an end is good news. Indeed, in terms of experiential significance, it is as important for this ministry to be limited in time as to be located in the transcendent reality of heaven. Both of these characteristics are related to the ultimate overcoming and elimination of sin (which is what both the Hebrew and the heavenly sanctuaries and high priesthoods are all about).

So it is not at all surprising that the letter to the Hebrews associates the ministry of Christ as high priest with his second coming. Each of the other biblical documents that provide the primary data for a doctrine of the sanctuary (Leviticus, Daniel, and Revelation) does the same in one way or another.¹³ The consummation of Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary is the final victory over sin. This ultimate victory of God is at the same time a victory for his people, and it inaugurates the final future which they share with God.

“Christ functions as high priest, not because God wants to keep us away from himself, but because he wants us to come close to himself.”

In Christian theology generally and in Adventist theology particularly, this triumphant consummation of God’s activity of atonement and reconciliation is described in terms of eschatological judgment, and it is

important that we never separate our thinking about judgment from our understanding of atonement and reconciliation.¹⁴ For on the one hand, the initiative and activity of God in atonement and reconciliation in Christ (in his historical, sacrificial ministry and in his heavenly, high-priestly ministry) constitute the basis and crucial issue of the final judgment. In the language of the fourth Gospel: "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19, RSV). Thus we understand why the one who atones and reconciles is the one who is our judge. It could not be otherwise. And we also know that the judge is not our adversary (for that is the role of the Enemy, the Accuser, the Satan), not a neutral, disinterested observer. He is the God who is

eternally with us, the God who is forever on our side.

And on the other hand, the consummation of atonement and reconciliation that is described as "judgment" is the confirmation of salvation. It is the final recognition and revelation of our acceptance of God's ultimate gift. At that point, God's continuing initiative on behalf of humanity has reached its objective.

As it was the function of the Hebrew sanctuaries, so now it is the function of the sanctuary in heaven to reveal the continuing initiative of God in reconciling, sustaining and reassuring humanity that the God who saved continues to be present with us until the glorious consummation of history. This is the supreme experiential significance of the doctrine of Christ as high priest.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. An earlier consideration of this subject, presupposed by this present essay, appeared in a paper presented to the Glacier View meeting of the Sanctuary Review Committee in August 1980 and was published under the title "Confidence in Salvation: The Meaning of the Sanctuary" in *Spectrum*, vol. 11, no. 2 (November 1980), pp 44-53.

2. Jack Provonsa, *You CAN Go Home Again*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), especially pp. 85-128, gives a powerful presentation of the revelatory dimension of atonement.

3. Cf. Provonsa, *You CAN Go Home Again*, p. 92: "At Calvary's point in time and place the curtains pulled back so that our dim souls could behold what was always so since there was separation between God and His creation. God's heart was laid bare at the cross. The cross did not *make* anything so, but revealed what *was* so."

4. Cf. Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress, 1982), p. 40: "Yahweh does not transcend time by immunity to it. The continuity of his being is not that of a defined entity, some of whose defining characteristics persist from beginning to end. It is rather the sort of continuity we have come to call 'personal'; it is established in his words and commitments, by the faithfulness of his later acts to the promises made in his earlier acts. The continuity of his being transcends time, to be *eternal*, in that he

keeps all his promises, in that time cannot take any of his commitments from him."

5. Aelred Cody, *Heavenly Sanctuary and Liturgy in The Epistle to the Hebrews* (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Grail Publications, 1960), p. 81.

6. Cf. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 276: "God does not become a religion, so that man participates in him by corresponding religious thoughts and feelings. God does not become a law, so that man achieves community with him through constant striving. He humbles himself and takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and the godforsaken, so that all the godless and the godforsaken can experience communion with him."

7. Cf. Edward Fudge, *Our Man in Heaven: An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1973).

8. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1898), p. 25. Cf. Charles Beecher, *Redeemer and Redeemed* (Boston, Mass.: Lee and Shepard, 1864), p. 65, cited by Ron Graybill, "E. G. White's Literary Work: An Update" (photocopied typescript, 1981), p. 15 and Appendix F.

9. Karl Rahner, ed., *Sacramentum Mundi*, six vols. (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1968-70), 3:207-8.

10. Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 205. While the idea of a suffering God is not dependent

on an understanding of the ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, a question may be raised regarding a possible connection between the traditional Christian insistence on the idea of an impassible God (who by definition could not suffer) and the traditional neglect of the Christ's high priesthood. For the logical incompatibility of the ideas of impassibility and Trinity, cf. Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, especially pp. 21–55; for the principal references to the ministry of Christ as high priest in the mainstream of historical and contemporary theology, cf. the appendix to my earlier essay, "Confidence in Salvation: The Meaning of the Sanctuary," *Spectrum*, vol. 11, no. 2, (November 1980), p. 51

11. Robert Browning, "Pippa Passes," I, 228–29.

12. Cf. Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 144–63; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes, eds., *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 181–204; Richard Rice, *The Openness of God* (Nashville, Tenn.: Review and Herald, 1980); Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, pp. 1–5, 21–40, 57–68, 161–84. On the tension between futurity and (timeless) eternity, cf. Cody, *Heavenly Sanctuary and Liturgy*, pp. 117–44.

13. The distinctive role of the Hebrew high priest was part of the ceremony of the day of atonement—

a ceremony that included the symbolic removal of sin as the goat designated "for Azazel" was sent out to perish in the wilderness (Leviticus 16:5–10, 21–22). This ceremony obviously carried strong eschatological overtones.

The prophecy of Daniel concerning the desecration of the sanctuary (and the concomitant oppression of God's people) by demonic forces comes to a climax with a promise of a "cleansing" (that is, a restoration) of the sanctuary (Daniel 8:9–14). Although it does not explicitly involve the figure of the high priest, this climax is surely an eschatological event.

In the apocalyptic visions of John, Christ appears in the heavenly sanctuary in the figure of a triumphant lamb who still bears the marks of sacrifice (Revelation 5:6), but whose victory is complete and who is the object of worship (5:13, 14:1–5). Here the eschatological context is both explicit and predominant. And in John's final vision there is no more sanctuary at all (21:22), for its function has been consummated and ended along with that of the High Priest.

14. Some of the recent theological discussion and debate within Adventism has been defective at just this point. It is particularly ironic that the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary should be misunderstood here, since the relationship between reconciliation and judgment is one of its most important theological elements.